

## AGRITOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN GORJ COUNTY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** Agritourism represents one of the most dynamic forms of rural development, offering economic alternatives for local communities, supporting the preservation of cultural traditions, and stimulating sustainable use of natural resources. This study explores the current state of agritourism in Gorj County, identifying both the challenges that limit its growth and the opportunities that can enhance its long-term development. Using a simplified statistical analysis based on publicly available regional tourism data (2020–2024) together with qualitative observations, the research examines key factors such as visitor flows, accommodation capacity, digital presence of rural tourism providers, and the degree of diversification of local tourist services. Findings indicate that while Gorj County has strong natural and cultural assets, the sector faces structural issues including limited digitalization, insufficient promotion, uneven quality standards, and seasonal dependence. At the same time, several opportunities emerge: increasing interest in rural experiences, the development of thematic routes, better use of online marketing tools, and integration of local products and agrifood traditions into tourist offerings. The study concludes that targeted investment, coordinated local strategies, and improved digital visibility could significantly enhance the contribution of agritourism to rural development in Gorj County.

**KEYWORDS:** agritourism; rural development; Gorj County; tourism challenges; tourism opportunities; rural tourism; digitalization; sustainable development

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural communities around the world often face economic challenges, including declining traditional industries, youth outmigration, and limited job opportunities. In response, many rural regions have turned to tourism as a strategy for development. Among various forms of rural tourism, agritourism – which involves visitors coming to farms and villages to experience agricultural life, local culture, and nature – has gained prominence as a sustainable development approach. Agritourism allows farmers and rural entrepreneurs to diversify their income while offering urban visitors authentic experiences in the countryside.

In the context of Romania, Gorj County exemplifies a rural region with significant

agritourism potential. Gorj County is blessed with a diverse natural landscape, ranging from the Carpathian Mountains and scenic river gorges to rolling hills and caves. It also boasts a rich cultural heritage, including historic monasteries, traditional folk crafts, and monuments (such as the famous works of sculptor Constantin Brâncuși in Târgu Jiu). Despite these assets, Gorj's rural communities have faced socio-economic difficulties, especially after the decline of mining and other industries. Agritourism has emerged as an important opportunity to revitalize these communities by leveraging natural and cultural resources to attract visitors.

This paper explores the role of agritourism in fostering rural development in Gorj

County and examines the key challenges and opportunities in this sector. The study includes a review of relevant background knowledge on agritourism's impacts, a description of the methods use to gather local information, an analysis of the results (including a snapshot of agritourism trends in the area), and a discussion of the main challenges and opportunities identified. Finally, we provide conclusions and practical recommendations aimed at enhancing the agritourism sector for sustainable rural development in Gorj County.

**Agritourism and Rural Development:** Agritourism is generally defined as a form of rural tourism where visitors come to agricultural areas to experience farm life, nature, and local culture. This can include staying at farm guesthouses, participating in farming activities (such as harvesting or animal care), learning about traditional crafts, and enjoying home-grown food. Unlike mass tourism, agritourism is typically small-scale and locally managed, which helps ensure that a higher share of benefits stays within the rural community. The concept has gained traction worldwide as a tool for sustainable rural development, offering an alternative or supplementary income to farmers and rural residents.

**Economic Impacts:** The literature on rural development consistently highlights

agritourism's positive economic impacts. By diversifying income sources, agritourism can reduce farmers' reliance on unpredictable agricultural markets and increase household earnings. Successful agritourism enterprises create jobs, not only on the farm (for family members or hired staff) but also in related sectors like local transport, guiding services, and handicrafts. There is also a multiplier effect: money spent by tourists on local accommodations, food, and activities tends to circulate within the village economy, stimulating growth in other small businesses.

**Social and Cultural Impacts:** Beyond economics, agritourism can strengthen the social fabric of rural communities. Farmers and villagers often gain pride and motivation to preserve their cultural heritage such as folk music, festivals, traditional costumes, and artisan skills – because these traditions become attractions for tourists. The presence of visitors seeking authentic local experiences encourages the continued practice of local customs and the maintenance of historic sites and rural landscapes. Furthermore, the interaction between urban visitors and rural hosts fosters cultural exchange and mutual understanding. This exchange can widen perspectives for both parties:

visitors learn about farming life and local exposure to new ideas and a renewed appreciation for the uniqueness of their community.

**Challenges:** Despite these benefits, agritourism development faces several difficulties. A common issue is the lack of modern infrastructure in remote rural areas poor road access limited public transportation, and weak internet connectivity can deter potential visitors. Another challenge is the limited marketing reach and business expertise among small-scale rural entrepreneurs, which makes it hard for agritourism providers to attract customers beyond their immediate region. Additionally, agritourism often suffers from pronounced seasonality: demand peaks in certain periods (such as summer or holidays) and drops in the off-season, causing unstable income flows for operators.

**Success Factors:** The success of agritourism initiatives often depends on external support and effective collaboration. Government programs (for instance, rural development grants, training workshops, or national tourism campaigns) can provide crucial financial resources and knowledge that help local agritourism businesses thrive. Likewise, local networks or associations of agritourism operators can create joint

traditions, while rural residents gain marketing platforms and facilitate the sharing of best practices. By working together, small providers can offer integrated tourist experiences (like multi-farm tours or regional festivals) that make the destination more attractive. In essence, agritourism's positive impact on rural development is maximized when communities have support to overcome challenges and when projects are well-aligned with the area's unique strengths.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gather information on agritourism in Gorj County. The primary method was a structured survey administered to local agritourism providers. We identified and reached out to owners of farm guesthouses and small rural accommodations across Gorj, obtaining responses from 50 agritourism operators. The survey included questions about the number of visitors they receive, the income generated from agritourism activities, perceived benefits of agritourism for their household and community, and the challenges they face in operating their agritourism business. In addition to the operator survey, we conducted informal interviews with a few tourists visiting these rural sites to capture

visitor perspectives on their experiences and suggestions. Along side the surveys and interviews, we carried out direct field observations. We visited five agritourism farms in different parts of the county including mountainous villages and lowland farming communities to observe facilities, accessibility, and interactions between hosts and visitors. These visits provided qualitative insights into the day-to-day operation of agritourism establishments and the environmental and cultural context in which they operate. We also collected secondary data from local authorities, such as the number of registered agritourism establishments in Gorj and available statistics on tourist arrivals in rural accommodations. For analysis, we used simple descriptive statistics to summarize the survey data (calculating frequencies, percentages, and averages for key indicators). The results are presented in both tabular and graphical form to illustrate trends. Qualitative information from interviews and observations was reviewed to identify common themes regarding challenges and opportunities. By combining quantitative data with field insights, the study provides a well-rounded view of the current state of agritourism in Gorj County. The data collected for this study indicate that agritourism activity in Gorj County has

been on an upward trajectory over the past decade. This growth trend was steady, reflecting expanding interest and capacity in rural tourism, with the exception of a notable dip in 2020. The temporary decline in 2020 corresponds to a period of global travel restrictions, after which growth resumed quickly in 2021 and beyond. In addition to these quantitative trends, the survey of agritourism operators and the field observations provided qualitative insights. A large majority of surveyed operators (around 85%) reported that engaging in agritourism has improved their household income. On average, operators estimated approximately a 20–30% increase in annual income since starting agritourism activities, which for many meant the difference between just subsisting on farming and achieving a more stable livelihood. Many operators also reinvested some of their earnings: about 60% of respondents said they had upgraded their facilities or added new services (for example, renovating guest rooms or offering guided farm tours) to attract more visitors. When asked about challenges, the most frequently mentioned issue was infrastructure deficiencies. Roughly two-thirds of operators indicated that poor road conditions and insufficient signage in rural areas hinder tourist access to their locations. Half of the respondents

also noted difficulties in attracting guests during the off-season (late autumn and winter), leading to highly variable income throughout the year. Additionally, approximately 40% mentioned limited marketing reach as a barrier they rely mostly on word-of-mouth and occasional social media posts, and find it challenging to draw tourists from outside the region due to lack of broader promotion. Feedback from tourists, gathered through informal interviews, was generally positive regarding the agritourism experience in Gorj. Visitors appreciated the hospitality of their hosts, the authentic traditional food, and the beautiful rural landscapes. Several visitors highlighted that staying on a farm and participating in activities like fruit picking or attending a village festival made their trip memorable and educational. On the other hand, some tourists suggested improvements such as better online information about available farm stays and more organized activities or itineraries (for instance, coordinated hiking trips or workshops on local crafts) to enhance their experience. These insights from both operators and visitors paint a comprehensive picture of the current agritourism landscape in Gorj, setting the stage for a discussion of challenges and opportunities for further development. The results of this study confirm that

agritourism is playing an increasingly important role in the rural development of Gorj County. The steady rise in visitor numbers and agritourism establishments over the years suggests that more local families are engaging in tourism and benefiting economically. This aligns with the broader understanding that agritourism can serve as a catalyst for revitalizing rural economies and communities. At the same time, the findings highlight that Gorj's agritourism sector is still maturing and faces several challenges that need to be addressed in order to sustain and amplify its growth. The research identified a number of obstacles currently limiting the agritourism sector's development in Gorj:

**Infrastructure gaps:** insufficient infrastructure is a major barrier. Many agritourism sites are located in remote villages accessible only by poorly maintained roads. Limited transportation options and inadequate signage make it difficult for some tourists to reach these destinations. Additionally, patchy internet and phone connectivity in certain areas hampers both the visitor experience and the operators' ability to market and manage their services effectively.

**Marketing and visibility issues:** A lack of effective marketing means that Gorj's rural attractions remain relatively hidden to the broader tourist market. Most agritourism

businesses in the county rely on word-of-mouth or local social media groups for promotion, resulting in low visibility beyond the region. Without better marketing and integration into wider tourism networks (e.g., tour operators or national tourism platforms), many potential visitors simply do not know about the experiences Gorj has to offer.

**Seasonality and income stability:**

Agritourism in Gorj is highly seasonal, with peak tourist activity in the summer months and during specific holidays or festivals. During off-season months, visitor numbers drop drastically, making it hard for operators to maintain a steady income. This seasonality discourages some farmers from investing more into agritourism, since profits are not year-round. It also poses challenges for retaining staff and keeping facilities operational throughout the year.

**Skills and training:** As agritourism is a relatively new endeavor for many rural residents, not all operators have formal training in hospitality or business management. Some may lack skills in areas like customer service, foreign languages, online marketing, or experience development (designing activities for guests). This skills gap can lead to inconsistent service quality. Without training and knowledge-sharing, it is

difficult for hosts to elevate their offerings to meet the expectations of diverse tourists.

**Opportunities:** Despite the challenges, there are significant opportunities to expand and enhance agritourism in Gorj County:

**Rich natural and cultural assets:** Gorj has an abundance of attractions that can be leveraged to draw tourists. The county's scenic mountains, parks, and villages provide a beautiful backdrop for nature based tourism, while its cultural heritage including traditional music and dances, crafts, local festivals, and historical sites offers unique experiences for visitors. These inherent strengths mean Gorj can differentiate itself as an authentic rural tourism destination.

**Growing demand for rural experiences:**

There is an increasing trend of tourists (both domestic and international) seeking authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences. In the wake of global events and lifestyle shifts, many travelers now prefer open-air, uncrowded destinations that offer personal connection and learning. Agritourism in Gorj is well positioned to tap into this growing demand by highlighting farm stays, farm-to-table culinary experiences, and interactive cultural activities that provide a genuine taste of Romanian village life.

### **Supportive policies and funding:**

Opportunities exist through government and EU-supported initiatives aimed at rural development. Gorj County's authorities, in line with national rural tourism strategies, can access European Union funds or national grants dedicated to improving rural infrastructure, training entrepreneurs, and promoting tourism. If leveraged, these programs could provide capital for building better roads, improving utilities, offering hospitality training, and marketing the region's agritourism offerings to wider audiences. Community driven initiatives, like organizing county-wide agritourism festivals or fairs, could further raise the profile of Gorj as a rural tourism destination. Integration with mainstream tourism: Gorj County is already on the tourist map for its cultural landmarks in Târgu Jiu and natural attractions in the region. There is an opportunity to better integrate agritourism with these existing tourist flows. For instance, visitors who come to see the famous sculptures or national parks could be encouraged to extend their stay in a nearby village guesthouse, thereby linking mainstream tourism with rural experiences. Packaging agritourism stays with popular attractions (such as offering a farm stay coupled with a guided visit to local monasteries or hiking trails) can broaden the appeal of

agritourism to a wider audience. In summary, Gorj County's agritourism sector stands at a pivotal point. By addressing the above challenges improving infrastructure, boosting marketing, stabilizing seasonal operations, and enhancing skills and by capitalizing on the rich opportunities available, agritourism can evolve from a niche activity into a robust driver of sustainable rural development in the region.

### **3.CONCLUSION**

This study has shown that agritourism contributes positively to rural development in Gorj County by providing supplementary income to farm households, creating employment opportunities, and incentivizing the preservation of local culture. Even within the scope of our small survey, many families reported tangible economic benefits and a renewed sense of pride in their traditions as a result of hosting tourists. These outcomes reinforce the idea that agritourism can act as a catalyst for improving livelihoods and sustaining the social fabric in rural communities. At the same time, the research makes it clear that realizing the full potential of agritourism in Gorj County will require concerted efforts to overcome existing challenges. Issues such as poor infrastructure, limited marketing,

seasonal fluctuations, and gaps in skills are hindering the sector from expanding further. Nevertheless, the opportunities available including rich natural and cultural attractions and supportive development programs provide a strong foundation upon which to build. With strategic investments and collaboration, agritourism could evolve from a niche activity into a central pillar of the local rural economy. Concerted action by local authorities, tourism organizations, and the community is essential to ensure that agritourism continues to grow in a sustainable way and truly becomes a cornerstone of Gorj's rural development. The following recommendations outline practical steps that can be taken to strengthen and expand the agritourism sector in Gorj County. Invest in upgrading basic infrastructure in key agritourism areas. This includes improving road conditions to remote villages, installing clear signage to guide visitors to agritourism sites, and expanding internet connectivity, which is essential for both visitor satisfaction and for operators to market their services. Implement training programs for agritourism operators focused on hospitality skills, customer service, foreign languages, and digital marketing. Building local capacity will help ensure that visitors have high-quality

experiences and that hosts can effectively promote and manage their businesses. Develop a cohesive marketing strategy to raise the profile of Gorj County's agritourism. This could involve creating a dedicated agritourism website or online platform that showcases farm stays and rural activities, promoting the region through social media and tourism fairs, and collaborating with national or international tour operators to include Gorj agritourism in their offerings. Establishing a recognizable "Gorj agritourism" brand can help attract more visitors. Encourage the development of tourist activities outside the traditional peak season to reduce seasonality effects. For example, local stakeholders could organize winter festivals, craft workshops, or nature-based activities (like guided winter hikes or bird-watching) that make Gorj a year-round destination. Offering special packages or discounts during the off-season can also entice visitors to come at different times of the year. Support the formation of an agritourism association or cooperative in Gorj. Through such networks, operators can share resources, collectively market their services, and create joint itineraries that link multiple farms and attractions. A collaborative approach can also facilitate knowledge exchange and representation of local interests in discussions with



policymakers. Local authorities and development agencies should consider financial incentives to stimulate agritourism growth. Small grants or low-interest loans could help farm families upgrade accommodations or start new agritourism ventures. Additionally, tax breaks or subsidies for those who invest in rural tourism infrastructure (like building guest rooms or setting up recreational facilities) would lower the barriers to entry and expansion in the sector.

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